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Far from the Maddening Crowd -- You Only Live Twice

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__Column Editor's Note:__ I'm excited to start a new column for __Against the Grain__. In my previous articles for the __Biz of Acq__ column in these pages, I've focused on the application of newer technologies to acquisitions work. As easy as 2.0 technologies are to use, often they are adopted only for patron-facing services, rather than explored for their benefit to back of the house use. I'd like to continue to discuss the adaptation of new technologies to acquisitions, collection development, and library vendors, as well as interview others that are thinking about and using these technologies in their own domains. — XA

After writing articles about some obvious candidates like **wikis**, I'd like to tackle something a bit more foreign to our normal work. **Second Life** is a virtual world where people interact through avatars — representations, often idealized, of themselves. The **SL** platform is increasingly being used for educational purposes as well, in particular because it allows for a face-to-face experience for distance learning. Many universities have established a **Second Life** presence and have started experimenting with classes and events. The basic communication method is chat, but streaming audio and video are also possible within the world. With these tools, you can talk with others, listen to a podcast, watch a video lecture, or speak in front of a group.

Why should I care?

Second Life is a space that has been embraced by many librarians and some publishers as a way to interact with others with similar interests. For many Residents, **Second Life** is a place to advertise products or flirt with strangers, but the library community has also established reference desks and exhibits of special collections. Archive material that normally can not be seen without special permission can be displayed as 3D objects for avatars to read or touch. Libraries can stream real life book talks or presentations into **Second Life** for consumption by a wider audience. **Stanford University** is one of the large libraries that has purchased an island in **Second Life** and they have used it for lectures as well as to give visitors a virtual look at documents that are locked away in special collections.

One recent event that highlighted the interaction between libraries and publishers in **Second Life** was the **Digital Lives Research Conference**. This conference was held in person at the **British Library** on February 9-11 2009 and virtually in **Second Life** on February 11. The home for the virtual conference was the Elucian Islands, an area in **Second Life** owned by **Nature Publishing Group** and **Macmillan Publishers**. The conference presentations from the **British Library** were streamed live into **SL** for the attending avatars and one presentation was held virtually with the speaker avatar presenting to the group. The virtual conference included attendees from far-flung places like Russia, Poland, Dublin, Houston and California. The attendees were able to discuss the presentations and meet each other, without ever leaving their houses.

Nature Publishing plans to hold more such events, including lectures and conferences, aimed at scientists and librarians. They are also playing with the possibilities of developing educational displays in the virtual world. For example, **Nature** opened an exhibit in **Second Life** on February 25th of a scale replica of **Darwin's H.M.S. Beagle** with an accompanying interactive game for visitors to play with and learn more about **Darwin's** voyage.

More Ideas

What else could we do with a virtual world? As travel budgets are slashed for the next few years, we will be increasingly looking for ways to meet up, network, and learn together virtually. Established organizations, like the **Public Library Association**, have started to add a virtual component to their conferences to provide an alternate avenue for attendees that are not funded for in-person attendance. **Second Life** could provide a way to interact face to face and speak with others in real time without leaving your desk. The **Virtual Worlds: Libraries, Education, and Museums Conference**, scheduled in **Second Life** for April 24-25, 2009, is now in its second year and costs only about $30 per attendee. Though this conference focuses on virtual worlds for libraries, a conference discussing real life library topics could take advantage of the tools available in **Second Life** to hold a virtual portion of their events for those attendees who can't travel to the real one.

For vendors, **Second Life** could provide a way to show a product to a librarian audience, without having to visit in person. The presentation could include images, video, links to Web content, a PowerPoint presentation, and question and answer through streaming audio or chat. There is no cost to vendor or librarian for the meeting and the virtual presentations are infinitely customizable for different audiences.

The **Alliance Virtual Library** recently held a **Tech Fair** in **SL** with exhibits describing tools and services aimed at **Second Life** educators and librarians, as well as presentations by vendors. This could be done just as easily for products aimed at real life librarians.

Another advantage to a virtual world is the possibility of simulations, modeling, and education through interactive training. For example, a process mapping of a new workflow could be designed in three dimensions with the stakeholders able to walk around it and

through it to decide if it is feasible. If your group is considering an office space redesign, this too can be created in a virtual world to look at possible problem spots. Finally those who deal with patrons or clients can be trained through simulated encounters, just as you would role-play in real life, to obviate the need for an in-person trainer.

Challenges

Second Life is built for higher-end higher-powered computers. The platform must be downloaded and installed, instead of being browser-based, and you will need a fairly quick Internet connection to have a good experience. Older computers may struggle. People may struggle as well — **Second Life** has a definite learning curve. Once you figure out how to move around and touch things, you will be able to explore, but there are many more complicated options, like building new structures, that take some time to master.

One challenge for teaching and learning in **Second Life** is that it is difficult to have a large group of people in the same area of the virtual world. More than 50 people in one space slows the response time to the point of making it problematic to move or interact with others. Planning for smaller classes, meetings, or lectures helps and some islands team up when there is a popular event so avatars can attend at an alternate space if the host space becomes full.

One last challenge is that many of the Residents in **Second Life** are not there to learn new things or to talk to librarians. They are there to relax or play. Sometimes you may encounter people who are disruptive or disrespectful, because they can hide behind an anonymous avatar. For the most part, **SL** should be considered as a communication medium between like-minded people who have met there for a purpose, rather than a place to talk with whoever drops in. Likewise, you should use caution when exploring outside the educational islands without a knowledgeable guide, since some areas are best for mature audiences.

Getting Started

Second Life (*www.secondlife.com*) is a free software download. You will need some time to sign up, set up an avatar, and decide on its appearance. Your avatar can roam this three-dimensional world and buy clothes and goods with **SL** internal currency, the linden. The linden does have a dollar equivalent and some people make money selling virtual items in **SL**. When you are ready to explore, try some of the educational spaces. A good place to start is Info Island I and II. Academic and public libraries make their home on the Cybrary City Islands. The **Digital Library Foundation** has an island called Entropia. Click the Map button to search for a place and then Teleport to take yourself there. Happy exploring! 🦖

*Thoughts? You can reply to **Xan Arch** at <xanadu@stanford.edu>.*